

FRIENDS OF CHAMBER MUSIC

The Carmina Quartet

Matthias Enderle, violin
Susanne Frank, violin
Wendy Champney, viola
Stephan Goerner, cello

Saturday, February 20, 1999, 8:00 p.m.
Faye Spanos Concert Hall
University of the Pacific
Stockton, California



Program

I

from Quartinen der Vergänglichkeit (1998-1999)

Paul Giger (b. 1952)

Quartet in G minor, Opus 10

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Animé et très décidé
Assez vif et bien rythmé
Andantino doucement expressif
Très modéré; Très mouvementé et avec passion

—*Intermission*—

II

Quartet in A minor, Opus 51, No. 2

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Allegro non troppo
Andante moderato
Quasi minuetto, moderato; Allegretto vivace
Finale: Allegro non assai



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Program Notes

Paul Giger – from Quartinen der Vergänglichkeit

The Carmina Quartet commissioned this work as a part of a “Fin de Siècle” program, a project to mark the approaching turn of the millennium.

“Quartinen” refers to the poetic form, a cycle of minimalist 4-line poems. The meaning of the word “Vergänglichkeit” is suggested by root words “fleeting” or “ephemeral” in the sense of the phrase “life is fleeting.”

The composer found his work taking form as a cycle of shorter movements totaling over an hour in length. In his idea, it is to be viewed as one would a Schubert song cycle, the performers being welcome to choose the movements according to the requirements of the program at hand.

Paul Giger was born in Herisau, Switzerland in 1952 and studied violin until he was fourteen. For a year he traveled in Asia supporting himself with his improvisational skills as a street violinist, finally returning in 1971 to his formal studies in the conservatories of Zurich, Berne, and Winterhuh. He gained his music teacher's degree, and a degree as a violin soloist. Giger has worked as Concertmaster of the St. Gallen Symphony Orchestra, as a freelance musician and composer, and gives master classes for string players.

Claude Debussy – Quartet in G minor, Opus 10

Debussy's only string quartet, finished in 1893, was dedicated to and is thought to have been first performed by the Ysaÿe Quartet in Paris for the Société Nationale de Musique, formed in 1871 to foster “Ars gallica” partly in reaction to the Prussian War. Debussy once said he had expressed all he had to say in this form in his one quartet. The musical coloring he achieved later suggests that if he had completed the second that he did begin, he might have achieved, according to Cobbett, “the idealization of string tone.”

Debussy wrote slowly and his fame rests on a comparatively small output. But he ventured into unexplored territory where no musician had gone before. He wrote little chamber music: the quartet presented here, and three sonatas for various instruments with piano or harp, composed near the end of his life, make up his output. The quartet was written during the period when Debussy

conceived the “Prélude à l'Après Midi d'un Faune” (1892), the unique composition that opened wide the door to the music of the twentieth century, the dawn of an era marked by a greater harmonic and formalistic freedom than had been known.

Debussy was to free French music from the spell of German Romanticism. For Debussy, music was primarily a sensuous experience. “French music is clearness, elegance, simple and natural declamation. French music aims first of all to give pleasure,” he declared. He made the customary pilgrimage to Bayreuth in homage to Wagner but then established his stand: “Je suis musicien français.” He once wrote: “Wagner... was a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn.” Debussy was a dawn. As he himself wrote, “I no longer believe in the omnipotence of the eternal *do, re, mi*. There must be other scales... Music may be revived by a continual interchange of major and minor thirds.” Debussy had actually heard a group of musicians from Bali at the International Exposition in Paris and was excited by their (to European ears) ill-tuned pentatonic scales. He countered by composing in a whole tone scale. He abandoned the Baroque harmonic progression and found reason “to use incomplete chords and vague floating intervals. By drowning a key one can always arrive where one likes without difficulty and go out of and enter any door that one prefers. Thus, our world of music becomes enlarged and also more subtle...” Debussy was not opening the way to anarchy for as composer he was a model of sobriety and economy.

He chose to compose a quartet, the medium closest to the form of its early classical development. Debussy disclaimed interest in the “development” sections of the classical “sonata-allegro” form. At a concert he whispered to a friend, “Let's go—he's beginning to develop!” Instead he followed the French master of cyclical form, César Franck, basing his entire composition of the theme presented in the very first measures, an impassioned theme, quickly spent. Contrasting material is used freely as was Debussy's intent, exercising his “fantaisie” through free variation. The opening phrase appears in the second movement, the scherzo, first playfully and then more smoothly. Perhaps it is this pizzicato movement that caused Chausson to comment that Debussy's form was lacking in decorum. Debussy countered that Chausson did not let himself go enough. The theme,

more drastically altered, appears in the slow movement and in the finale as the lyrical subsidiary theme. But it does not culminate in any impressive final presentation as Franck might have done. Debussy's approach has been described as nearer to Monet's in recording the variations of light on the façade of Rouen Cathedral.

Johannes Brahms – Quartet in A minor, Opus 51, No. 2

This long anticipated quartet was first performed in 1873 at the Berlin Singakademie by the Joachim quartet.

From 1853, when Brahms, with Schumann's consent, planned to issue a string quartet, until 1873, when Brahms finally sent his Opus 51 to Simrock the publisher, some twenty other string quartets had been food for his fire. Brahms had taken twenty years to give the world his first symphony; he had intimate knowledge of past masterpieces and seemed obsessed by Beethoven. “You have no idea,” he told a friend, “how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us.” Brahms' extreme self-critical, diffident attitude towards his own work may have come from his beginnings as a pianist in a brothel in Hamburg. When Schumann called him, in his journal *New Paths*, the “young eagle” who was “called forth to give us the highest ideal expression of our time,” Brahms felt himself intimidated by such expectations. And the one position that he longed for, to be conductor of the Hamburg Philharmonic Orchestra, was denied him till he was too old to accept it. Vienna became his home, where with his gaze back to the Classical era, he enriched the traditions of “the sacred city” as he called it, with a retrospective flavor, rich romantic lyricism, and breadth of conception and design.

The Op. 51 quartets, rather than fearing the shadow of Beethoven, acknowledge him openly and frankly, Hogarth believes. Self-criticism and that of others (Joachim, his violinist friend, who was constantly urging their completion, and of course Clara Schumann) fed into the creation of these quartets. Two movements were given to Clara in 1869, one of which she found “most successful and highly imaginative” though the first was not to her taste. Numerous rehearsals brought constant revision as well, such as that of the Florentine Quartet at Baden-Baden, and the Walter Quartet in Munich. Brahms put off his publisher in a letter saying, “I am sorry,

but I must ask you to be patient. I realized more and more how difficult it is to master virtuoso technique when one is not specially adapted for it...It took Mozart a lot of trouble to compose six lovely Quartets, so I will try my hardest to turn out a couple fairly well done."

Both quartets were dedicated to his friend, Dr. Theodor Billroth, but it is thought that perhaps he originally planned the dedication of the second to Joachim—had Brahms not done so in a fit of ill temper? He did write Joachim that he was glad that the great violinist was playing the quartets but that they were "not meant for your violin, but it seemed useless to wait till I could write better music." Wait longer, after twenty years?

That Joachim was involved in the quartet is revealed by the fact that the opening scene forms the letters F, A, E, the initials of Joachim's motto: "Frei, aber einsam" (Free but lonely). Brahms' motto, used at the height of their friendship, was F, A, F, "Frei aber froh" (Free, but happy) and in the coda the two are included.

The opening movement is characteristically built from the smallest of thematic bricks. But what could have been a prolonged tragic atmosphere is dispelled by a traditionally lyrical second subject; however, the power initiated by the terseness of the theme is sustained. The intricate polyphonic texture is made to sound natural and spontaneous.

The Andante in ABA form starts as a lullaby, with a rocking accompaniment, soon with rich counter melodies. A dramatic episode with stressed motifs and tremolo is soon resolved, varied in tonality and scoring.

The Minuetto starts with a peppery vivace, but is given over to the charm of the dance. After a scurrying trio the decorum of the Minuet returns.

In the final movement, an energetic Hungarian Gypsy theme is used in a rondo form, rich with canonic entries, double stopping and runs. In the coda, the violin offers a reflective ethereal passage, hinting at the opening phrase of the quartet, then a brief final gypsy orgiastic fling.

Notes by Catherine Roche

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